

Response to the Barker Review of Land Use Planning by the University of Cambridge

Q1. Is the planning system sufficiently flexible and/or responsive to the right signals to deliver the right development in the right place, given the changing economic circumstances due to globalisation, demographic change, natural resource pressures and environmental change? If not, what policy measures might help to deliver this flexibility?

A1. Planning in the Cambridge Sub-Region has been sufficiently flexible and responsive to economic, social and environmental signals in recent years. The recent review of regional guidance and development plans has put a new Cambridge-centred development strategy in place of a previous policy of dispersal that led to a mismatch in employment and housing development in Cambridge, which had created congestion and housing affordability problems, and resulted in recruitment and retention problems for the University and other organisations in Cambridge.

The local planning authorities have responded positively to these signals and to the expected continued growth in University staff and student numbers by:

- Releasing University-owned land from the Green Belt for development for a mix of uses, including affordable key worker housing for University staff, to enable long-term growth of the University
- Releasing land from the Green Belt near to the University's School of Clinical Medicine at Addenbrooke's Hospital for bio-medical development
- Releasing land from the Green Belt around Cambridge to increase the supply of affordable and market housing
- Planning for the development of sustainable communities through a mix of housing tenures and sizes, sustainable transport provision, open space, etc.
- Selectively managing the development of employment space in favour of the Universities at Cambridge and related research uses.

The planning authorities in Cambridge have provided the University with a large supply of land for academic, research and housing development to meet needs for the short, medium and long term (30+ years).

Q2. Do you have any views on the scope of the plans at the different spatial levels in England which are now emerging following the introduction of the new system in 2004? Are there further improvements to the plan-making process at the different spatial levels in England, particularly regarding the need to encourage a positive/proactive approach to planning, which was a key theme of the new plan-making system? Does the current system strike the right balance between central direction and regional and local discretion?

A2. There is a democratic deficit at the Regional level. There is a plan making deficit at the sub-regional level, which will become more apparent as saved structure plan policies expire. There is inadequate scrutiny of development proposals at regional EiPs. Central Government decisions on growth locations and directions on dwelling numbers do not sit comfortably with regional and local discretion.

Q3. Sustainable development is the core principle underpinning planning. Does the current system achieve the right balance between economic and other goals, such as the regeneration of areas and the promotion of social cohesion, improving the quality of design of buildings and urban environments, and the protection and enhancement of our natural and historic environment? Are some environmental, natural resource, or social considerations given too much or too little weight?

A3. The current system, supported by the requirements for sustainability appraisal, environmental impact assessment and strategic environmental assessment, housing needs and market assessments, and open space assessments, achieves an appropriate balance between economic, social and environmental goals.

Q4. What, if anything, could the English planning system learn from the planning and consent systems operated in other countries in order to respond to this new economic environment?

A4. We have no comments.

Q5. What is the impact of planning on encouraging or impeding business investment? In this context, how would you assess the potential of recent reforms to the English planning system, which are now being implemented? Are they increasing the transparency of the system and providing greater certainty for businesses? What further reforms, if any, are desirable in order to improve the transparency and effectiveness of the system still further?

A5. Successful planning makes markets, by creating and protecting physical conditions that make investment attractive, by providing certainty to developers and investors, and in delivery the agendas of government and local communities.

Government policy requirement for greater community involvement in planning processes is clearly having an effect, but it must be stressed that this inevitably is at the expense of the speed of decision taking. The introduction of a portfolio of development plan documents, comprising a Local Development Framework, requires a significant increase in community involvement events, statutory consultations and public examinations. This has resulted in Cambridge in the phased production of development plan documents. This has affected this University, as an Area Action Plan Development Plan Document for a major University development proposal will not be adopted until 2008 – 5 years after the location was identified as a development location in Structure Plan policy.

Some recent changes to planning legislation of policy have decreased certainty for businesses, including the introduction of greater flexibility in the plan making system, which has led to cases of sites being de-allocated, and the reduction of the time limit for the implementation of full planning permission from 5 to 3 years. Neither of these changes have yet affected the University, however.

Q6. Is the planning system sufficiently "joined-up" with other related aspects of government policy? In particular, are Regional Economic Strategies delivering a clear economic framework to help inform Regional Spatial Strategies? Is there sufficient interaction between RDAs and RSSs when preparing their respective regional strategies and if not how might greater interaction be encouraged?

A6. We have no comments.

Q7. Planning applications for major projects will typically take a considerable time to work through all the necessary stages. Do you consider the system puts too much emphasis on speed or do you feel that is too slow? If there is an undue emphasis on speed, what are the negative consequences of this and how could they best be avoided? If the process is too slow, what could be done to overcome delays? In particular, what improvements might be made to the planning appeal system to improve its speed and efficiency?

A7. The University has contradictory experience on the speed of decision taking for planning applications. Cambridge City Council, to whom we make most of our planning applications, encourages pre-application discussions, provides a thorough checklist of requirements for planning applications, and encourages the submission of all relevant details with the planning application, on the understanding that it will take a decision within the 8/13 week time periods. There is evidence though that when applications do exceed the time period, they are not given due attention by the LPA. This seems to be a particular issue where s106 obligations are required, especially where the s106 involves different Council Departments and County Highways; there appears to be a lack of capacity and responsibility within the local authority to co-ordinate the production of s106 obligations.

Q8. Is there evidence to suggest that the direct costs of making a planning application are deterring investment? Are there any unnecessary burdens/how might information requirements be streamlined to reduce the regulatory burden from the process of making an application?

A8. No

Q9. To what extent are high occupation costs in England likely to be due to planning constraints, or due to other factors such as imperfect competition or lack of transparency in the land market? What is the economic impact of these costs in terms of the main drivers of productivity?

A9. We have no comments.

Q10. How does the planning system impact on competition, through influencing barriers to entry and exit and economies or scale? If there are areas where there is a negative impact, how can these be addressed, while protecting other goals of the planning system?

A10. At Cambridge, the planning authorities have positively influenced competition for land for business & research development, by selectively managing land for employment development, in favour of educational uses and associated research institutes and establishments, and R&D organisations that can demonstrate a special need to be located close to the Universities, as well as locally important business uses.

Q11. To what extent does the planning system effectively support innovation through fostering the formation of business clusters and wider agglomeration of economic activity?

A11. Positively – see above. There are positive Structure Plan and Local Plan policies for cluster development.

Q12. Do planning authorities have the skills and resources required to help promote sustainable economic development? If not, what is the best way to ensure that resources match the challenges the system faces? Are there ways to increase further efficiency of process?

A12. The Planning Authorities at Cambridge do not employ experts in economic development, but they do take expert advice, for example from a reputable Cambridge firm of economic development consultants, and from experts on financial appraisal and development viability. We have no evidence to demonstrate that the local planning authorities fail to help promote sustainable economic development. Indeed Cambridge has experienced significant economic development in hi-tech and bio-medical research activities for many years.

Q13. Are the new arrangements for stakeholder engagement in the plan-making process succeeding in engaging those representing economic interests, including SMEs? If not, what are the barriers to that engagement and how might they be addressed?

A13. It is too early to tell, although the University has been able to engage thoroughly as a stakeholder in plan making processes.

Q14. Are there ways that the incentive structure for decision-makers and local communities can be improved so that a balance is achieved between local interests and the interests of the wider community regarding proposals for economic development?

A14. The key issue at Cambridge and the sub-region is infrastructure provision. The area has experienced significant growth and development over the last 20 years but that has not been matched by commensurate growth in infrastructure provision, particularly transport infrastructure, and it is widely recognised that there is a substantial infrastructure deficit. To continue to achieve sustainable economic development, and improve the incentive structure for decision makers, decision takers and local communities, there must be substantial investment in infrastructure, including road and rail. Costs will not be borne by development and Government must commit substantial resources.

Q15. Economic development can help achieve the regeneration and renaissance of urban and rural areas. Are there ways which planning could strengthen economic performance in regions, sub-regions (including city regions) and at the local level?

A15. We have no comments.

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Estate Management and Building Service
University of Cambridge